

Explored through a case study, design activism is found to be not just disruptive creative action, but a 'practice' embedded in everyday life that allows communities of practice to emerge.

Design Activism: Catalysing Communities of Practice

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Over the last decade, we have witnessed a renewed interest in design as a socially engaged practice. Debates around 'social design'¹ point towards myriad approaches and disciplinary fields interwoven with grass-roots initiatives and social movements. Among these, design activism has gained traction as a critical spatial practice² that operates on the fringes of, or 'outside commercial or governmental structures'.³ This paper envisions design activism as a vehicle for the promotion and intensification of democratic practices and values involved in shaping the urban environment. As a radical departure from consensual decision-making and institutionalised agendas that are validated through tokenistic or instrumental forms of participation,⁴ design activism places the emphasis on exploratory and open-ended processes situated in mundane and ordinary practices [1].⁵ Design activism positively stimulates ways of collective making, learning and negotiating as means of advocating for citizens' 'right to the city'.⁶

We seek to unpack design activism through social practice theory, a school of thought rooted in cultural theories that place social phenomena in 'practice' – the latter understood as a 'routinised way in which bodies are moved, objects are handled, subjects are treated, things are described and the world is understood'.⁷ This framing points to a performative characterisation of design activism through collective moments of enactment and action. We also embrace the constitutive elements of practice, namely 'material, competence and meaning',⁸ as a significant tool for understanding the socio-spatial processes involved in the transformation of an unused urban space.

In relation to our own empirical research (funded by the UK's Economic and Social Research Council), we contend that design activism can catalyse and nurture social formations sustained around practices engaged in the place-making process. The strong personal relations that arise through making, learning and negotiating are articulated as a 'community of practice'.⁹ Here we would like to frame design activism as a 'practice' that should not be considered in isolation, but as being 'bundled' with other social practices.¹⁰ The case study is located in Newcastle upon Tyne, UK, and has been

developed by the authors since 2015.¹¹ It highlights how social practices have coalesced around a joint sense of citizenship that grew out of the desire to transform an urban space.

Understanding design activism

The last 50 years have witnessed a succession of design approaches involving users more closely in significant decisions that affect their everyday lives and working environment. In particular, since the 1970s, Participatory Design emerged out of evidence 'that the environment works better if citizens are active and involved in its creation and management instead of being treated as passive consumers'.¹² This approach 'attempts to examine the tacit, invisible aspects of human activity'¹³ and empower participants through their involvement in a design process of 'collective "reflection in action"'.¹⁴

Collaborative planning equally focuses on the importance of participatory approaches that enhance the role of citizens in place making processes,¹⁵ recognising that citizens acquire 'knowledge built up through their day-to-day experience of a place'.¹⁶ Whilst this is considered an asset in partnerships between state and society, more progressive debates from traditions rooted in planning literatures of social innovation point out that transformative power lies not in what citizens say or require, but in 'what they can do'.¹⁷ This suggests that unearthing skills and assets people may hold is a means of empowerment towards 'the building of strong, resilient and mutually supportive communities that could assure their members their needs would be met'.¹⁸

However, from early on, critical voices raised concerns about the oversimplified and somewhat contested views of what participation entails. Sherry Arnstein warned almost 50 years ago of the elusive nature of the term participation and argued that 'there is a critical difference between going through the empty ritual of participation and having the real power needed to affect the outcome of the process'.¹⁹ Arnstein proposed a classification of the role of the user and their involvement in decision-making. From a passive involvement, to mainstream consultations, through to activists and advocates shaping agendas, these levels of user engagement were structured in the form of a 'ladder of participation', which ascends from a base of low user involvement to a high level of citizens' control.

As in Arnstein's time, it remains the case that while there might be numerous benefits associated with best practices in participation – such as empowerment, appropriation of spaces and places as well as collective responsibility –²⁰ it is not a process without shortfalls, biases and challenges. Within design disciplines, critical voices have highlighted the inherent risks of tokenistic or instrumental forms of participation, when participants are mostly drafted in to validate a process.²¹ Notably, Alistair Fuad-Luke points out how socially-driven design approaches tend to pave the way for 'neo-liberal consensualism'.²² The banner of the 'social good', as flagged in participatory processes,²³ emerges from pre-defined agendas within what can be referred to as neo-liberal discourses. In the best case, grassroots initiatives are the starting point of 'social design' processes that subsequently metamorphose citizens' aspirations into institutional programmes accountable for the delivery of social or economic agendas that do not question existing power structures.²⁴

In contrast to institutionalised forms of social design, 'design activism' leaves aside endeavours related to a pre-defined 'social good' and presents an

approach oriented towards the creation of 'alternative' visions. Within the discipline of design, recent decades have seen attention focused on the definition and conceptualisation of activism. Embedded in everyday life,²⁵ design activism challenges established powers²⁶ through its open-ended nature, granting opportunities for experimentation.²⁷

Guy Julier argues that the emergence of contemporary design activism is a reaction to contexts of neoliberalism exacerbated by the 2008 economic crisis.²⁸ Design activism is defined as a movement that 'is more self-consciously and more knowingly responsive to circumstances'.²⁹ Yet, more importantly, this form of activism can be identified with a process of experimentation situated within the ordinary preoccupations of everyday life, 'with real people in real places'.³⁰ By underscoring the nuanced textures and details of the mundane, and deeply engrained in grassroots movements, design activism sits at the fringes of (or outside) institutional spheres. For Lenskjold et al., building on the everyday emphasis of design activism, this form of activism emerges from 'an ethnographic curiosity', a rich immersion in the everyday that allows an alternative appreciation of the familiar environment.³¹ In addition, they highlight the struggles of working within 'hegemonic public institutions and agendas' whilst allowing for subtle changes and speculations toward possible futures.³²

Meanwhile in an urban design context, Thomas Markussen advocates materialities that 'introduce [...] heterogeneous material objects and artefacts into the urban field of perception' with the aim of disrupting familiar environments as well as setting new conditions for urban experiences and daily life.³³ This performative approach taps into the aesthetics of the material transformation of urban settings, thus affecting its experience. More importantly, Markussen stresses that the word activism – while loaded with political meanings that recall rebellious acts – in the context of design draws attention to *change* through positive experimentation and action, introducing 'a designerly way of intervening into people's lives'.³⁴

These understandings of design activism, with their distinct emphases, point towards an open-ended process that grants opportunities of experimentation, and the transformation of everyday settings and practices. For Fuad-Luke, it encapsulates a kind of 'teleological freedom' proposing alternatives futures that potentially challenge the status quo of public institutions, power structures or neo-liberal agendas.³⁵ Design activism is manifested in the work of numerous collectives such as: Rebar in San Francisco, known for initiating a global yearly design action with the aim of transforming parking spaces into temporary parks; Santiago Cirugeda in Seville whose 'urban prescriptions' (*recetas urbanas*) project identifies gaps in urban regulations as spaces for emancipation and subversion without breaking the law;³⁶ the work of the *atelier d'architecture autogérée* (aaa) founded by Petrescu & Petcou in Paris which has been seminal in experimenting with temporary appropriations of urban space towards community life and ecological lifestyles;³⁷ and the emerging collective YA+K, also in Paris, whose recent work highlights the notion of 'urban bricolage' in the tradition of citizen-led or D.I.Y. urbanism.³⁸

The temporal, spatial and experimental nature of design activism is well delineated in scholarship but its long-term effect on everyday urban environments remains elusive. Moreover, the study of how activism might influence socio-spatial dynamics is indeed largely under researched. As such, we propose an analytical device to shed light on the social formations and

collective practices that design activism catalyses and nurtures. Adapting Lucy Kimbell's discussion of design thinking, we mobilise social practice theory to rethink design activism as 'constituted in practice' through performance or action.³⁹ This ontological shift embraces an understanding of the socio-material world that 'treats practices as the "smallest unit" of social analysis'.⁴⁰ In doing so, we firstly seek to debunk the myth around the activist designer and move the emphasis from individual to practice, thus repositioning design activity as happening 'across a number of people and artefacts'.⁴¹ Secondly, we move away from a central position of design activism and place it in a constellation of practices – gardening, celebrating, playing – that allow for new collective formations to arise.

Placing design activism in Social Practice Theory

In the following section, we survey recent scholarship on social practice theory in order to understand the rippling effects of design activism. In particular, we focus on social formations catalysed around design activism, as well as the relationships between practices involved in the transformation of the urban space.

Andreas Reckwitz situates social practice theory as rooted in cultural theory and offers an accomplished definition of the elements constitutive of practice. Unlike other versions of cultural theory, 'practice theory does not place the social in mental qualities, nor in discourse, nor in interaction. [...] It places the social in "practices"'.⁴² As such, practice is defined as:

*A routinised type of behaviour which consists of several elements, interconnected to one another: forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, 'things' and their use, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge.*⁴³

Developing Reckwitz's definition, Shove et al. theorise practice in a more simplified and succinct model comprised of three elements: material, competence and meaning [2].⁴⁴ 'Materials', in this context, include things, technologies, tangible physical entities, and the stuff of which objects are made.⁴⁵ In the case of design activism, this encompasses both urban space and distinct objects or artefacts deployed by activist designer that stage new spatial narratives capable of disrupting 'naturalised assumptions [that] defy conventions about how to interpret places'.⁴⁶ 'Competence', here, refers to 'embodied knowledge',⁴⁷ 'forms of understanding and knowledgeability'⁴⁸ and skills, know-how and technique⁴⁹ necessary for the carrier to successfully 'perform' a given practice. Competences include those of the communities involved as well as the designer's: communities' competences are embedded in tacit, 'implicit and largely historically-culturally specific'⁵⁰ knowledge while the designer's competence lies in their distinct set of tools, specific culture and epistemological position.⁵¹ 'Meanings', here, include symbolic meanings, ideas and aspirations.⁵² This refers to motivational knowledge and the affective dimension – the cornerstone of design-led activism – reflected in the energy and buzz that builds momentum around grass roots actions.

It is the 'active integration' of these three constitutive elements – materials, competences and meanings – that lies at the centre of Reckwitz's concept of practice as viewed by Shove et al. Indeed, a practice constitutes a 'block', relying upon the existence and interconnectedness of elements and cannot be reduced to one single element.⁵³ As such, these three constitutive elements of practice coalesce in events, appropriations and transformation of urban spaces.

A common distinction throughout social practice theory is between 'practice-as-performance' and 'practice-as-entity'.⁵⁴ The former refers to the enactment of a practice, the active 'doing' which acknowledges the multiplicity of elements that are utilised and combined in the performance of a practice. Whereas the latter refers to an 'ideal type' of practice, not reducible to any one particular performance of a practice, but rather a broad 'block' or 'pattern' of a practice.⁵⁵ In considering the dynamic between performance and entity, we highlight not only a circuit of reproduction and status quo but also opportunities of change: 'to intervene in performance is to intervene in entity and vice versa'.⁵⁶ As such, practices are never static or the same, but rather, they are dynamic, constantly being reproduced and changed.

The distinction between performance and entity helps us frame the practice of design activism as intrinsically part of a process of iteration and recurrence. It only exists in successive enactments, at moments of 'bodily doings' and 'sayings'. Such framing moves away from the one-off, well-publicised events that might be associated with temporary urban uses⁵⁷ and, instead, introduces design-led activism as a practice embracing a process of iterative loops of feedback and feed-forward.

We focus on two key considerations that underpin a reading of design activism through social practice theory. First, design activism as practice doesn't concern solely the individual, the 'designer' or 'expert', but many other actors and agents as 'carriers' or 'practitioners'. Practice can therefore be characterised as a collective endeavour, in that it exists because people are engaged in actions within communities. Thus, we mobilise the notion of a 'community of practice' to describe the dense intertwinement of social relations organised and sustained around the practice.⁵⁸ Secondly, we place design activism amongst a constellation of ordinary practices – including, as previously mentioned, gardening, celebrating and playing – which are deeply rooted in the everyday.⁵⁹ This co-existence of practices sheds light on ways in which the materials, competences and meanings of design activism can connect to other practices and, in turn, be reconfigured by them. The following section expands on practice as community endeavour and the linkages between design activism and other social practices that help uncover how groupings or 'bundles' of practices have the power of transforming each other.

Communities of practice and relationships between practices

The notion of a 'community of practice' suggests a characterisation of practice that focuses on social relations revolving around making, learning and negotiating.⁶⁰ Such a concept has relevance at a number of scales, whether at 'the household level, organisational approaches, [...] or shared cultural practices'.⁶¹ Social learning theorist Étienne Wenger articulates three dimensions to this collective endeavour: 'mutual engagement', 'joint enterprise', and a 'shared repertoire'.⁶² Communities of practice exist when people are engaged in actions and when dense relations of 'mutual engagement' are organised and sustained around what people do.⁶³ Individuals therefore contribute through their competence and knowledge of what they do and know, creating tight interpersonal relationships with one another, yet forms of disagreement, challenges and competition can all be forms of participation. 'Joint enterprises' emerge from the negotiation and complexity of mutual engagement. It is about the relations among those involved: the collective decision of 'what matters and what does not, what is

important and why it is important', with this potentially becoming reified in the form of 'rule, policies, standards, and goals'.⁶⁴ Finally, the 'shared repertoire' of a community refers to the 'routines, words, tools, ways of doing things, stories, gestures, symbols, genres, actions, or concepts' which the community has produced [3].⁶⁵

As a space for engagement in action, shared knowledge and negotiation of enterprises, a community of practice provides an opportunity for the transformation of social practices. More importantly, it enables deeper insights into both the transformative and reflexive learning processes in which knowledge, understandings, shared meanings, materials and competences grow and are negotiated.⁶⁶ As a result, communities of practice can give rise to social innovation, which emerges through the interaction between practitioners and particular elements of practices. The concept of community of practice in relation to design activism brings into focus the interaction between carriers of the practice, including those skilled participants who continue to carry and circulate particular elements of the practice, as well as new participants who 'enrol' and 'equip' themselves with such elements through social interaction and knowledge sharing.

Furthermore, we also acknowledge design activism not as self-contained practice but one that is situated among other everyday ordinary practices. When practices co-exist alongside each other, they may do so in a cooperative way. As such they are not performed in isolation but relate to one another,⁶⁷ forming types of relationships defined as 'bundles' or 'complexes'.⁶⁸ By bundles of practices, we mean practices that are somewhat interrelated but co-exist in time and space through shared elements of practice – materials, competences and meanings. They happen in parallel but also have separate existences and remain independent entities. In contrast, 'practice complexes' denote constellations of practices, which are either hard or impossible to separate from one another⁶⁹ owing to their inter-dependent nature.

The above model of the bundle of practices illustrates the way that design activism is nested among other social practices. Reflecting on the ECObox project in Paris, Petcou and Petrescu describe the temporary occupation of a former railway depot as a 'place where [residents] can play, ride their bikes, garden, draw, play music'.⁷⁰ The emphasis is placed on the opportunity of practices to co-exist and flourish in time and space around design actions. For Matt Watson, understanding these bundles within a practice approach enables opportunities of change to be identified outside of the practice in hand.⁷¹ As a result of this, it can be considered that the evolution of one practice may influence other practices too. When some of the elements (material conditions, meanings or competences) figure in several practices, they constitute a common ground and point of connection, acting as zones of overlap and intersection between practices.⁷² This can act as a connective tissue, which holds complex social arrangements in place, whilst also having the opportunity to disrupt and pull practices apart.⁷³

Practising design activism

The ensuing case study developed by the authors illustrates the conceptualisation of design activism as practice distributed across materials, competence and meanings, that come together at moments of performance or enactment. It reveals design activism as necessarily intertwined with gardening, celebrating, and playing. It illustrates the potential for new

collective formations to arise. Drawing from recent scholarship on design activism as discussed here, our own case study proposes an open-ended approach grounded in everyday urban life.⁷⁴ We argue that the dynamics of the socio-spatial transformation that emerged around a small urban space is part of a broader debate about the contribution of design activism to communities of practice.

The case study, located in the neighbourhood of Fenham in the city of Newcastle upon Tyne, unfolded in two phases. The first phase, entitled *Fenham DIY Streets*, involved a collaboration between Sustrans, a leading UK charity that champions sustainable transport, and Newcastle University's School of Architecture, Planning and Landscape. This first stage of the project, which lasted for nine months, focused on designing complementary participatory design methods that would widen the scope of the well-trialled *Sustrans DIY Streets* method, whose remit is to help communities redesign their neighbourhoods with a focus on walking and cycling.⁷⁵ *Fenham Pocket Park*, the second stage of the research, engaged in a socio-spatial process with the scope of going beyond the remit of the *DIY Streets* project and led to the mobilisation of the local community of residents for the making of a permanent pocket park. *Fenham Pocket Park* started a couple of months after the conclusion of the first stage in November 2015.

Phase 1: *Fenham DIY Streets*

The *Fenham DIY Streets* project emerged out of the Cycling City Ambition Fund (CCAF1) agenda that Sustrans delivered on behalf of Newcastle City Council in the period 2013-2015. Four neighbourhoods in Newcastle, including Fenham, were identified by the City Council using Mosaic UK Consumer and Demographic Data to promote cycling, walking and safe playing for children in those areas. Sustrans sought the collaboration of Newcastle University's School of Architecture, Planning and Landscape to support and complement the *DIY Streets* project in Fenham. Funded by the UK's Economic and Social Research Council, our collaboration with Sustrans started in March 2015, a few months after the inception of the project. In the first instance, we drew on the initial results of the engagement that highlighted low levels participation amongst residents of the area.

The neighbourhood of Fenham, in the west end of Newcastle, is a socially mixed area with pockets of low-income council households with a high rate of dependence on state benefits.⁷⁶ The project focused on Fenham Hall Drive, a car-dominated street, where parking on pavements occurs and where public space is scarce [4]. Along the street stand two key civic institutions for local residents and neighbouring communities: the local library and community pool, perceived as civic hubs. The research aimed to engage community actors in re-visiting their urban environment.

In the months prior to our collaboration, Sustrans had engaged local stakeholders in the area such as local schools, library and community pool. Sustrans implemented a well-trialled sequence of events (such as activities in the local school, walk-about, family treasure hunts, planting) focusing primarily on needs and problems. A mid-term evaluation report detailed what residents dislike about the area: issues of pavement parking, traffic congestion, badly maintained pavements and litter among others.⁷⁷ Undeniably, the socially-driven approach of Sustrans' consultation advanced the banner of the 'social good',⁷⁸ within the institutional framework of the Cycling City Ambition Fund (CCAF1).

While maintaining a supportive relationship with Sustrans, we envisaged our involvement, by contrast, as an opportunity to open up the project beyond the delivery of infrastructure and shift the focus towards the creation of democratic arenas conducive to citizen-led transformation of the area. Indeed, the design activist practice we deployed was embedded in the everyday realities of the life of the street. We instigated an open-ended process aimed at inspiring people by designing prompts and temporary interventions to gain insights into the use and perception of the existing settings and to create a new shared urban experience in common for all participants and community actors. In turn, these experiences activated dialogue and opened-up aspirations. From our first encounters, conversations started to shift from problems and negative perceptions, to stories about the place, from preconceived restrictions to what-if scenarios. Through this process, the engagement sought to unearth skills, capacities and assets in the community whereby citizens could become committed stakeholders, ensuring the long-term sustainability of the project.

Multi-layered methods using a variety of design prompts in temporary settings supported, augmented or disrupted the experience of the area, thus provoking an opportunity for a new reading of a familiar environment. Drawing on participants' feeling of place, our situated practice helped reduce the distance between experience, reflection and projection and, as such, enabled an embodied engagement, activating both senses and imagination.

More specifically, we devised methods that would emphasise 'bodily doings' and 'sayings'. In particular, we drew from Elizabeth Sanders' cycle of interconnected and complementary activities as proposed in participatory design research, including the process of 'making, telling and enacting',⁷⁹ a cycle of activities envisaged 'as tools for collectively exploring [...] future ways of living'⁸⁰ through open-ended tasks that would allow group interaction and learning. We adapted these activities to our activist exploration, where *making* refers to the creation of physical artefacts ranging from small scale models or mappings to real size mock-ups; *telling* suggests verbal description of the present and future scenarios; and *enacting* allows the use of the body in the environment in expressing ideas of potential future experiences. This cycle of making, telling and enacting was structured around three thematic areas: unpacking affects, meanings and desires through sensory mapping methods; disrupting urban narratives through spontaneous temporary intervention methods; and enabling a new urban experience, through methods of temporary intervention.

Unpacking affects, meanings and desires: sensory mapping

This method is an adaptation of 'cultural probes' that take the form of designed prompts or tasks with the aim of enabling inspirational responses.⁸¹ Cultural probes 'aim to sensitise the participants to observe, reflect upon and report their experiences'.⁸² Specifically, our method sought to map social and material assets, capturing the feelings and stories of the site. Alongside an event organised by Sustrans, we set up a makeshift outdoor office desk using an existing public bench [5] in front of the library facing the busy road with its constant stream of car and bus traffic. Focusing on Sanders' *telling* and *making*, we created a physical scale model of the street, on which a provocative prompt stated: 'Imagine Fenham Hall Drive as the best street in Britain...', and located it on site. The model was equipped with 'mysterious and elusive'⁸³ materials varying in textures and colours (such as tin foil, pipe cleaners,

washing-up sponges and cotton wool) that were left freely as prompts for discussion or for interpretation to facilitate the sharing of perceptions, ideas and desires for the place. This sensory mapping aimed to awake existing senses and evoke an imaginary feel for the street [6]. Such an approach engaged a great range of people as the model activity came across as playful and light-hearted and did not require any competence in map reading. Many of the richest discussions emerged as part of a dialogue between parents and children, often when inhibitions and ideas of feasibility were disregarded. By the end of the day, we had recorded (using field notes) a series of scenarios ranging from very imaginative to very plausible, such as sparkly paving and tree houses including a young girl who imagined a 'candyfloss tower outside the sweetshop', to cafes or spaces for play and meeting. As one adult local resident noted: 'there are lots of old people in Fenham, could do with somewhere to sit and watch the world go by'.

Disrupting urban narratives: spontaneous temporary intervention

We designed two mobile benches with the intention of inhabiting the street, attending to *enacting* and *telling*. This occupation of urban spaces, mainly pavement areas where unregulated car parking takes place, allowed for a disruptive tactic that revealed socio-spatial struggles (the permanent need among pedestrians for car-free public space) and raised awareness of alternative futures. This form of 'provocation' was 'not [only intended] to understand the [urban environment], but to expose both the possibilities and constraints on future design directions'.⁸⁴ The intervention took place on the pavement of the intersection of Fenham Hall Drive with a road intensively used by adjacent primary and secondary schools. During a school day, from the 8:30am school morning rush period to the 6pm after-school pick-up, we disrupted a familiar setting with the introduction of two mobile benches staged on artificial grass and surrounded by potted trees. How would everyday life and mundane practices be affected by the simple introduction of two benches made with reused pallets and lined in bright green Perspex? From two vantage points away from the scene, we carried out a three day observation of the temporary setting and collected data on interactions of people with the new street furniture using 10-minute count sheets, taking notes describing the kind of interaction with the benches (such as ignore, stop, sit, jump) and length of time, and general observations of the street including traffic, moments of intensive use and weather conditions. The presence of the research team carrying out the observation also prompted a few spontaneous conversations with local passers-by that brought new insights into the area. Momentary interactions took place throughout the day in a space that is normally used as a car park despite being a pavement: some people stopped to read the information placed on the bench; secondary school girls sat down for a break whilst out for their lunch. The rhythm of the street changed towards the end of the school day, bringing new interactions amongst school parents whilst schoolchildren were running around, sitting on or using the benches as an impromptu climbing frame. Indeed, the temporary setting afforded opportunities for social interaction and activation of public space: breaking the current rhythm of the street, creating a space to play and dwell that gave a distinct identity to the street thus challenging the status quo whereby the local authority⁸⁵ was permissive towards pavement parking [7]. As noted by one participant who talked to the research team 'it's until you see things like this (bench) that you realise how dreary the environment is'.

Enabling a new urban experience: temporary intervention

Further *enacting* and *telling* was facilitated through a temporary intervention which sought to create a setting for a new urban experience. Ezio Manzini defines 'experience enablers' as 'pilot projects' that provide 'a direct, tangible experience of what a solution could be like'.⁸⁶ Together with local residents who had engaged in previous events, we collectively designed a temporary intervention focusing on themes previously discussed, including positive lingering, playing and greening. In addition, support was sought from local councillors, Newcastle Council's community officer and main stakeholders in the area such as representatives from Newcastle Library Services, Fenham Swimming Pool, Environmental Services at Your Homes Newcastle (council homes managers), Northumbria Police and nearby allotments. The temporary space transformed a grass area in between the library and the pool, an unused open space cut through a drive that leads to an allotment area located at the back of the two civic buildings [8]. The intervention was structured using alternating stripes of timber and artificial grass, punctuated with street furniture modules that were intended to accommodate seating as well as play space over the course of four days [9]. Local residents conceived the stripes conceptually as an opportunity to 'roll' out the scheme much further than the boundaries of the designated intervention, a raised deck that was built to create a safe space for children from cars accessing the allotments through the drive. Safety and accessibility for all was a key consideration, with the first stripe becoming a wide gentle ramp to provide access from the drive. The space created was intentionally left open to interpretation, with the furniture modules of various heights and lengths to accommodate a diversity of uses such as sitting, lying in the sun, jumping or playing, as well as enabling comfortable seat height for different age groups. This temporary setting allowed us the opportunity of experiencing the space over four consecutive days, observing, capturing comments through informal conversations (using field notes) and gathering further momentum with stakeholders and local residents. Overwhelming enthusiasm was expressed for the temporary transformation of a non-place into a social public space, as well as the desire for a more permanent setting. As summarised by a Sustrans officer: 'to give people that experience is so important. How can you change your viewpoint about something, by commenting on a map and a Post-it? It is not the same as sitting on a bench and believing that it can happen'.

Almost 9 months of engagement with situated events and interventions interspersed with conversations and focus group meetings, revealed a collective desire to create an outdoor space in which to pause, play and enjoy a quiet moment. More importantly, this engagement granted opportunities for socialising, which in turn, galvanised a group of local residents who took on the challenge of taking the vision forward.

Phase 2: Fenham Pocket Park

The core of this group was composed by six to eight local residents, each of whom projected slightly different visions about the potential future of the identified space in between the library and the pool: some focused on cycling, others on play spaces, or enhancing growing and planting in the area. As one local resident voiced: 'I'm not interested in cycling and I don't like a lot of

children spoiling my plants'. However, those differences were perceived as minor dissensus when a national community-led pocket parks funding opportunity arose. With the support of ourselves, Sustrans and local stakeholders – in particular the swimming pool, who saw a future park as benefitting the community of swimmers and local residents – applying for funding to Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) became a priority for the group. This revealed an incipient community with shared stories lived through the actions and a joint project that fuelled their engagement. Constituted later as 'The Friends of Fenham Pocket Park', the group started to become practitioners, and carriers of a place-making practice. Once the group were successfully granted funding for the construction of a Pocket Park, a new set of considerations with regard to responsibility, daily maintenance, and insurance emerged. Indeed, they also committed to planting, gardening, maintenance and management, notwithstanding events organised with the local community. Yet, the making of the Pocket Park was not without tensions at institutional level, due to conflicting agendas resulting from the wider context of austerity measures. Although the council had been supportive of the project, the land outside the library couldn't be offered for the Pocket Park as the library was threatened with closure. The Friends of Fenham Pocket Park struggled with an uncertain situation until the swimming pool (now closed down), a social enterprise run by volunteers, agreed for the park to be built on their land.

The design and brief for Fenham Pocket Park aimed to address the different visions that had been shared during the exploratory interventions in Phase 1 to create a place for relaxing, playing and enhancing the presence of nature in the area. The identified site of approximately 100 sqm consisted of an unused grassed area by the swimming pool, mowed twice a year by the local authority and flanked by bushes that only served to gather litter. Reflecting collectively on the temporary intervention in Phase 1, we returned to the design ideas associated with the concept of stripes as a structuring element for the ground. This design principle allowed the extension of the park onto the remaining unused grassed area by the library [10, 11]. Similarly, we chose to employ one unifying material (i.e. timber railway sleepers) to give a strong visual identity to the park as well as to create a diversity of elements including five planters, four benches and barriers, and ground stripes. The latter provided the anchoring design principle in terms of locating benches and planters in a reasoned way. The Friends embraced the ground stripes as they felt they made a strong design statement and clear intention in terms of potentially enlarging the park at a later stage. Between the stripes, golden gravel sourced from a local quarry was laid and compacted, thus creating a heightened sensory feel and brighter ground in stark contrast with the surrounding tarmac. The oversized benches, spaced at a comfortable distance, were intended to allow small groups to gather and also grant space for privacy to enjoy an individual moment to pause, surrounded by a great variety of plants [12,13]. Finally, the maintenance of the planters was taken on by the pool, library, local schools and adjacent allotments to encourage ownership of the outdoor space. One planter was set at a lower height for children to dig and plant.

An external contractor undertook the groundworks and both skilled and non-skilled participants contributed to the construction of planters and benches [14]. Residents, ward councillors, engagement officers, as well as,

park and allotment council officers, all in their different capacities became involved in the making of the park. Children from the local school planted flowers, fruit trees and bushes with an amateur horticulturalist from the Friends who introduced them to basic growing principles [15]. Activities of planting and growing in the public realm were aimed at embedding those practices amongst local residents, school children and stakeholders in the area. Children exhibited pride to their parents on the day of the opening, showing them what they had planted and how they did it. The community marked the opening of the pocket park with a celebration of the new social space for the neighbourhood [16].

Performing design activism

Social practice theory, as discussed above, provides a theoretical framework for engaging in design activism, not just as a vehicle of disruption of the present, the here and the now, but also as means to provide the necessary elements to pave the way for the future. The argument is underpinned by an account that highlights communities of practice in terms of doing, learning and negotiating, and situates design activism in among other social practices in terms of bundles of practices.

From a practice theory perspective, *Fenham DIY Streets* and the ensuing *Pocket Park* illustrate a cycle of enactments or situated performances in the form of events and temporary interventions. Design activism is characterised as an ongoing process of making, telling and enacting,⁸⁷ constantly being formed and changed as the elements of the practice evolve.⁸⁸ Out of our experiences, we will now go on to trace the dynamics of materials, competences and meanings at moments of coalescence and the bundle of social practices mobilised around the collective endeavour of transforming an urban space.

The material conditions ranged, in Phase 1 *Fenham DIY Streets*, from interpretative and inspirational prompts, as part of the sensory mapping, to larger mobile urban furniture that disrupted the familiar urban environment and made visible the lack of public space for socialising in the area.⁸⁹ In turn, the materials and prompts of the temporary intervention allowed an embodied experience to complement activities of *telling* through *making* or *enacting*. They also lent tangibility to an otherwise-undermined right to the city whilst affording an underused space with hitherto unthought-of social opportunities. The mobile furniture modules and the temporary public space in between the library and the pool created new narratives around collective appropriation of the public realm. The materiality of the *Pocket Park*, Phase 2, brings to the fore objects and materials intertwined with social phenomena⁹⁰ as a site of social becoming. Constitutive material elements of the park, such as benches, planters and the space in between are viewed as necessary components of practices and are just as indispensable as bodily and mental activities in practices of gardening, socialising, celebrating and playing.⁹¹

Competences, in a design context, are generally associated with those of the designer. However, our role, as researchers-facilitators and ‘carriers’ of the design activist practice, shifted as the project evolved. Introducing new objects and materials, through the iterative events, we exposed a practice of making as central to the engagement – local residents who gravitated towards the action of making were keen to share their own knowledge and competences. From the Friends of Fenham Pocket Park’s perspective, making together meant that everyone would bring along the practice of what they

knew best – as noted by one of the Friends in relation to a fellow member: ‘he has been great, he’s done the things on the secretary’s side that I either couldn’t do or wasn’t going to be interested in and he was good right at the beginning because it was just me and the plants and him doing the donkey work, the digging, which I couldn’t do’. As the Friends started to gain a central position in the place-making process, we underwent an ongoing repositioning, fluctuating between a major and minor role. Our practice initially facilitated conversations and visions with local people but, more importantly, unearthed competences and skills, out of which other social practices emerged (such as gardening and also practices of the day-to-day management of the park including event organising, fundraising, etc.) highlighting the bundling of practices in this particular location.

Thus, in the context of *Fenham DIY Streets*, meanings emerged concerning affective dimensions related to the perception of the urban area, through an exploration situated in the ordinary life of the everyday. The inspirational engagement stimulated narratives that, although provocative, helped in revisiting the area. For example, on the sensory mapping model, the writing ‘Imagine Fenham Hall Drive as the best street in Britain...’ presented an implausible scenario as a starting point for the interpretation of the area. As another example, the mobile benches intentionally introduced narratives associated with quiet public space to a car-dominated area of paving. While acknowledging existing negative perceptions, we enabled local residents to develop an awareness of potential assets in the urban context and helped to gather collective momentum. In turn, the making of the *Pocket Park* fostered the nascent motivational capacity and sustained the energy of the newly-formed group, fuelled by their on-going achievements. This process opened-up a new dimension to the project in the form of ‘a sense of shared purpose’ within the community.²²

Emerging communities of practice

The moments of engagement that took place in *Fenham DIY Streets* created opportunities for discussion and sharing but also made the multiplicity of views visible. As a result, a core group of residents emerged while others dipped in and out of the events, or simply disengaged due to lack of interest. For the core group, the process galvanised interpersonal relations sustained around mutual engagement and a wider commitment to citizenship contributing to enhancing the public life of the area for the benefit of all. From this sense of citizenship emerged a form of joint enterprise, focused around a space of positive dwelling in between the library and the swimming pool.

Indeed, the process enabled collective decisions about ‘what matters and what does not’, and also made visible the everyday or job-specific practices that were carried out by individuals and shared amongst the core group who constituted the Friends of Fenham Pocket Park. As such, they formalised their joint enterprise through establishing aims, goals and rules for the management of the park. These included everyday matters, such as watering plants, weeding, maintenance, organising neighbourhood events such as seasonal celebrations or raising funds for the Park extension [17]. The stories and experiences lived together, alongside with the routines, ways of doing, familiarity and camaraderie can be said to have developed into a shared repertoire. Thus, the convergence towards mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and shared repertoire gave rise to a community of practice around the making of *Fenham Pocket Park*. On this basis, we argue that the idea of

community of practice, as defined by Wenger⁹³, provides a comprehensive articulation of the potential long-lasting effect of design activism. We would thus stress that design is not an isolated practice but rather a dynamic socio-spatial process, whose ripple effects can reach far beyond the initial aims as demonstrated in the case study.

In the case of our empirical fieldwork, *Fenham DIY Streets* enabled individual practices to surface whereas *Fenham Pocket Park* provided the opportunity for those practices to be performed publicly and coalesce into a bundle. Gardening, as enacted and performed in the confines of the private home, for example, would not have become public or shared. Spaces and boundaries of the private and public thus became significantly blurred in this respect. Two main facets contributed to the emergence of a bundle of practices. First was the physical space that all practice carriers set out to transform – indeed one participant observed how ‘the Park was beginning to look a lot more like a community centre’.⁹⁴ Second, the shared endeavour for active citizenship became supported by cooperative ways in which practices are sustained and evolve alongside each other. For instance, thanks to the sharing of ‘materials, meanings and competences’, gardening became tightly intertwined with practices of managing, fundraising and event organising.

Conclusion: The rippling affects of Design Activism

This paper situates design activism as a practice articulated through the lens of social practice theory. It is not until design practitioners engage with communities that they become aware of participants as carriers of a range of practices. Our case study revealed the potential of a bundle of practices amalgamated around the impulse of communality and citizenship. Therefore, we argue that the contribution of design activism to the socio-spatial dynamics of place making can be articulated around the two main findings of our empirical research:

First, design activism identifies, draws out, and nurtures everyday social practices that co-exist as bundled practices. Furthermore, as discussed above, design activism becomes the glue that catalyses the interrelation amongst practices through its distinct set of materials, competences and meanings. Second, we claim that design activism forges communities of practice: mutually supportive and self-sustaining groups emerging out of the personal relations sustained and organised around a practice. The iterative and performative character of design activism can be seen to have allowed socialisation and mutual engagement to arise; the process of *making*, *telling* and *enacting* supporting negotiation of differences and contributing to collective decision making; as well as, familiarity and trust developed through learning and sharing crystallising a form of shared repertoire, a *modus operandi* for working together.

Our theorisation and practice of design activism highlights that it is only through the immersion in the everyday, that this practice can be responsive to the ordinary, mundane circumstances affecting people’s lives⁹⁵ and ‘reveal spatially embedded struggles’⁹⁶. Design activism requires navigating a fine line between an open-ended process and the constraints of working within or alongside an institutional framework. As advanced by Lenskjold et al.⁹⁷, designers can balance this seemingly opposing intents by nudging both subtle changes and opportunities within pre-defined agendas; Fenham Pocket Park in this regard did neither emerge out of a pre-defined plan or happen as an unforeseen outcome, indeed it came into being through

shifts and ripple effects elicited by design activism in the sphere of social practices. As such, we contend that the significance of design activism, as a sustained and iterative process, lies primarily in the creation of settings that give rise to communities of practitioners, in our case arising around a shared sense of citizenship. Thus, attending to social practices should be situated at the heart of socially engaged design; and rather than occupying a place at the fringes of 'social design', should be central to it.

Acknowledgements

arq gratefully acknowledges:

Daniel Mallo and Armelle Tardiveau: all images, except [3, 10, 12, 13, 17] by Damien Wooten, and [6] by Bryony Simcox

This work was supported by the Economic and Social Research Council, Impact Acceleration Account [Grant Ref: ES/M500513/1, Newcastle University].

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Rorie Parsons is a Post Doctoral Research Associate in Geography at The University of Sheffield. Rorie's research is concerned with issues of sustainability and understanding social change. He received his PhD at the School of Architecture, Planning and Landscape at Newcastle University.

CAPTIONS

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- [2] Elements of practice – adapted from Elizabeth Shove, Mika Pantzar, Matt Watson, *The Dynamics of Social Practice: Everyday Life and How it Changes* (London: Sage Publications, 2012), p.29
- [3] Relations of mutual engagement are organised and sustained around making, learning and negotiating.
- [4] Fenham Hall Drive, Newcastle upon Tyne (February 2015).
- [5] Makeshift outdoor office desk with model of the area located on site (March 2015).
- [6] Sensory mapping: image of a scale model displayed on Fenham Hall Drive (March 2015).
- [7] Spontaneous street intervention on Fenham Hall Drive (March 2015).
- [8] Enabling a new urban experience: temporary intervention site plan (October 2015).
- [9] Enabling a new urban experience: temporary transformation of an unused grass area in between Fenham Library and Fenham Community Pool (October 2015).
- [10] Fenham Pocket Park.
- [11] Fenham Pocket Park, Site plan indicating potential future extension.
- [12] Fenham Pocket Park.
- [13] Fenham Pocket Park, bench detail.
- [14] Fenham Pocket Park on site (May 2016).
- [15] Planting activities with school children (May 2016).
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